

One Among Many: A Pilgrim's Journey

By Christopher A. Calderón, S.J. '05



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As I held his blistered foot in my hand, I became aware of the immigrant's exhaustion and heartbreak. He had spent days in the desert, wandering, in search of hope, and his blisters were the size of silver dollars. There wasn't much I could do, but as I knelt at his side with his bare and aching foot in my hands, I realized that it was grace that had brought us together. Hundreds of miles from home, I was on an unknown journey and this man confirmed for me that we are called to serve and love. Through him and others, I experienced genuine humanity. What's more, I encountered God.

This journey began two years ago when I joined the Jesuits and my superiors asked that I let go of control. As part of my formation, I would be sent on a pilgrimage to learn to trust that God would provide. It is not a traditional pilgrimage of going to a specific sacred place. Rather, it is a three-week journey where grace and the sacred are hoped to be experienced along a path that is unknown.

Dropped off at the downtown Los Angeles Greyhound station with a backpack over my shoulder, a one-way bus ticket to Tucson, Ariz. (a place I had never been), \$40 in my pocket, and no idea what was going to happen next, my pilgrimage began. Once I arrived, I turned to a list of resources, but after several hours of phone calls to shelters, parishes, and community organizations, not a single one worked out. I thought back to the park bench I had passed—could I sleep there? Should I spend the little money I had on food? What if I needed it later? My anxiety level was peaking. I needed to start over and turn to God and ask for help.

Within a day, I found a couch in a church meeting room to sleep on and one door after another began to open. People offered me advice, a plate of spaghetti, a floor to sleep on, a free ride, and, above all, a chance to learn and serve and a chance to be loved and cared for. God was providing.

For three weeks, opportunities to travel and work all over the border availed themselves. Whether it was setting up water stations for migrants in the Arizona desert, working with recent deportees in Mexico or witnessing the kindness of strangers,

these were the experiences where God was revealing Himself to me, confirming that only in letting go can grace transpire.

Moreover, it was the (undocumented) immigrant community that was most generous. Those who had little shared their food, time, and spirit. A little girl holding onto her mother gave me a few coins and told me to buy something to eat. A man who had been lost in the desert for more than a week spent several hours with me talking, laughing, and, at times, crying. An older woman with her rosary in hand reminded me to pray and not be afraid to ask God for help, especially in times of suffering.

They were all in search of hope and opportunity and they trusted that God would help them reach their goal. They, too, were pilgrims. Even though many were exhausted, most had been assaulted and robbed, and nearly all had nothing to their name, they all mentioned their faith in God.

Hearing their stories I recognized the blessing it was to know them. Our lives were different, but our wants were the same, and we were connecting through our basic humanity. This was most clear when I had the chance to bandage the feet of recently deported migrants, some of whom had spent several days trekking through the desert.

In treating people's wounds, my actions and words didn't seem like they were coming from me, but rather from God. I was not the one caring for these people; it was God working through me. God was also caring for me through them.

They were opening my eyes to a God who holds you when you are weak and broken, who provides light when surrounded by darkness, and loves abundantly. I was there with them because of God.

Because of the generosity of many, I was able to purchase a return bus ticket home. As I sat in that bus I realized that I never went hungry or homeless. Had I not let go, my experience could have been completely different. But journeying as a pilgrim requires journeying on God's terms. In a way, we are all pilgrims. We are all seeking a way to God and in letting go and trusting, we can then recognize how God is showing us the path, loving us along the way. [USF](#)